



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

November 10, 2013

“You Are My Witnesses”

(Luke 24:45-48)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things’” (Luke 24:45-48).

Collect of the Day

Living God, Your almighty power is made known chiefly in showing mercy and pity. Grant us the fullness of Your grace to lay hold of Your promises and live forever in Your presence; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Much of what we know is the result of eye witnesses. We rely on what we're told, and the more people that have witnessed an event, the more reliable we find their witness to be. For example, we know Abraham Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth, and though we were not there to see it for ourselves, we believe it because there were many in Ford's Theater who saw it happen. They were eye witnesses. We have no reason to doubt them.

We're told Mozart wrote symphonies, and though we didn't observe that ourselves, yet we believe it, because others did observe him, or at least recognized his musical penmanship, and saw him deliver the manuscripts and be paid for them.

Much of what we know and believe is the result of eye witnesses. And so it is with Jesus. We weren't there to observe his life, death and resurrection, but we have come to believe the testimony of the eye-witnesses. Remember, wherever he went, there were usually crowds following him. Therefore thousands observed his miracles. They saw him heal the ten lepers, and the man born blind, and the paralytic man lying on a mat. They saw him heal the man with the shriveled arm, and the man who was both deaf and mute. They saw him raise from death the son of the widow at Nain, and they saw him call Lazarus out from his tomb. And they knew things like that usually didn't happen. People with leprosy usually didn't get better, and if they did it wasn't immediately and at someone's

command. And dead people usually stay dead. The crowds found all of it simply remarkable. Matthew 4, “And he went throughout all Galilee . . . proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him . . .” (vv23-25).

Those early eye witnesses watched him do these miracles. They saw the reaction of those who were healed but also the reaction of others in the crowd. They knew their eyes weren't just playing tricks on them. Not even Harry Houdini could restore a man's shriveled arm and hand simply by saying “stretch out your hand” (Lk. 6:10). No one accused Jesus of being a magician.

But some eye witnesses were hostile toward him. In Matthew 9 after Jesus exorcized a demon, quote, “the crowd was amazed and said, ‘Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel.’ But the Pharisees said, ‘It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons’” (Mt. 9:33). In other words, “he indeed has extraordinary powers, but they come from the devil.”

Another example of a hostile account of the miracles comes from outside the Bible. Archaeologists uncovered a report from the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing body under Roman occupation. The report says Jesus of Nazareth, quote, “will be stoned, because he has practiced sorcery and lured Israel into apostasy.” What is sorcery? Sorcery is a miracle that finds its origin in the devil . . . whereas miracles come from God. The Sanhedrin was not denying the miracles. (They couldn't because thousands had witnessed them.) They were only discrediting the miracles as from the devil rather than God.

The Crowds were also on hand to witness his suffering and death. They heard Pilate give the order that he should be flogged and crucified. They saw the soldiers carry it out. Many saw him breathe his last on the cross, and they

saw the Roman centurion confirm and ensure his death by plunging a spear deep into his side. But they also saw him resurrected! The Gospels say he appeared first to the women, and then to Peter and John, then to the twelve. Paul wrote, “After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time. Then to James, then to all the apostles” (1 Cor. 15:4-8).

We know how shocked they were, how fearful when they saw him with their own eyes. Of course they thought he was a ghost. But to prove he wasn't, Jesus ate with them. Ghosts don't eat. He allowed them to touch him and feel that he had substance and flesh, which ghosts don't have. They listened to his teaching and preaching. Ghosts don't preach.

And then they went home and kept it all to themselves, never said a word to anyone right? No, that's not how these things happen. They went home and told others about what they had witnessed. They talked about it with family, neighbors, friends . . . not because some preacher was chiding them to get out there and make evangelism calls. They talked about it because they had witnessed an extraordinary event and the normal human response is tell others about it. If you had been in New York City on 9/11 you would have told many people about your experience. That's what most people do to process things. And that's precisely what happened when Jesus died and rose again. They talked about it, tried to wrap their arms around it. How could one who was so powerful be put to death so easily? Why didn't he oppose them? And now that he has overcome death, why doesn't he seek revenge? Why does he keep talking about forgiveness and making disciples of all nations?” The eye witnesses surely talked and talked and talked and ultimately, by the Holy Spirit, many concluded he must be who he said he was: the Son of God, powerful, but also gracious and forgiving.

Those eye-witnesses, they were the first evangelists, untrained, unintentional, without having been sent, without ulterior motives. They simply told others what they had seen. It wasn't some sacred obligation. They couldn't help themselves. And you can be sure the Holy Spirit used the

testimony of those eye witnesses to ignite faith in others (1 Cor. 12:3).

Much of what we know and believe was handed down to us by eye witnesses. It's time we, as Christians, reclaim those eye-witness testimonies. I say this because many today are trying to discredit them. They're trying to say it never happened. "They made it all up. They're not reliable." Can you imagine how angry those witnesses would be if they only knew.

Has that ever happened to you? Imagine for a moment that you witnessed a heated conversation between co-workers in the break room. Your boss asks you about it, and you try to recall word for word what you saw. How would you feel if your boss then said, "Well, I don't believe you; I don't think it happened that way. This is how it really happened. . . ." How would you feel? You were there. He wasn't. I would want to say, "Are you calling me a liar? Are you saying I was hallucinating?"

This little scenario is happening right now, but on a grand scale: the eye witness testimony of thousands is being flat out denied. Those with an agenda, two thousand years later, are saying, "It never happened that way. This is what happened." And unfortunately, those who *were* there are not around to defend the truth. They're dead. But remember, we also know how many of them died. They died because they refused to keep quiet about what they had seen and heard.

Do not let skeptics today rob you of those eye witness testimonies from 2000 years ago! The early church grew like a wildfire . . . in spite of fierce persecution . . . in part because of the energy and courage and commitment to the truth of those early eye witnesses.

You cannot serve as eye-witnesses to what happened 2,000 years ago. But at least you know what God has done for you. And our text says, "You are witnesses of these things." You cannot give eye witness testimony to Christ's death on the cross. But can tell others what the grace of Jesus Christ means to you. You cannot describe to others the

expression on Jesus' face when he said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" But you can tell them that God has never forsaken you. He has forgiven you and given you that certain peace. You cannot give eye-witness testimony to his miracles, but you can tell others how God carried you through difficult times. "You are witnesses of these things." You have a story only you can tell of God's grace in Jesus Christ. You're of that story. And here's the point: the world needs your story. Those who know and respect you need to know what God has done for you. Tell them how much. You don't have to invent a story about how he pulled you up from the dregs of addiction or abuse. Don't exaggerate anything, negative or positive. Just give credit where credit is due. "You are witnesses of these things."

It is LWML Sunday. I got a little excited by this text and therefore forgot to say much of anything about LWML until it was too late, and for that I apologize to all those who are wearing purple or forgot to. "You are witnesses of these things." Suffice it to say the LWML has taken this verse seriously, and for many, many decades has been devoted to the support of mission work near and far. Part of what they do is equip women young and old to be witnesses, to be the custodians of the stories only they can tell of what God has done for them. The LWML here is called "the Women of Good Shepherd" and this group is alive and well, trending younger actually, and quietly doing a lot of good work. I encourage you to check it out and give it a try.

"You are witnesses of these things." You can trust the eye witness accounts of the Bible because those people really had no reason to mislead you or lie to you. In fact they had every reason to hide the truth. You can trust them because they were willing to die for the truth of what they saw, and many did. You can trust them because they did not point to themselves but to Jesus. They saw him die. They also saw him resurrected from the grave. They saw the marks of his crucifixion. They heard him preach and teach and some of them even wrote down what he said and did. They were witnesses of these things. They gave testimony

so that you and I would know the extraordinary events they witnessed 2000 years ago in that part of the world, and why it makes such a difference today, in your life, and in this part of the world. Amen.

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